

# ***AGNES GOES TO PRISON:***

## ***Gender Authenticity, Transgender Inmates in Prisons for Men, and Pursuit of “The Real Deal”***

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*Historically developed along gender lines and arguably the most sex segregated of institutions, U.S. prisons are organized around the assumption of a gender binary. In this context, the existence and increasing visibility of transgender prisoners raise questions about how gender is accomplished by transgender prisoners in prisons for men. This analysis draws on official data and original interview data from 315 transgender inmates in 27 California prisons for men to focus analytic attention on the pursuit of “the real deal”—a*

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*concept we develop to reference a dynamic related to how gender is accomplished by transgender inmates. Specifically, among transgender inmates in prisons for men, there is competition for the attention and affection of “real men” in prisons: the demonstrable and well-articulated desire to secure standing as “the best girl” in sex segregated institutional environments. Our empirical examination sheds light on the gender order that underpins prison life, the lived experience of gender and sexuality for transgender inmates in prisons for men, and how that experience reveals new aspects of the workings of gender accountability.*

**Keywords:** transgender prisoner; sex/gender binary; doing gender; gender accountability; embodiment

In 2009, Raewyn Connell published a thoughtful consideration of Harold Garfinkel’s story of “Agnes” (Garfinkel 1967), a young woman who identified herself to the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Clinic researchers and clinicians studying gender identity disorders and who was seeking a surgical “correction” for the “mistake” that was her penis. Agnes became what Garfinkel (1967, 180) referred to as a “practical methodologist” to deliberately seek acceptance as an unassailably “normal, natural” female, deserving of surgical attention. Agnes’s project was to convince Garfinkel and others that she was “naturally” a female, that her “inner” female was adequately reflected in her outward appearance, comportment, and point of view as a woman. From this, West and Zimmerman (1987) concluded: “Her [Agnes’s] problem was to produce configurations of behavior that would be by others seen as normative gender behavior” (quoted in R. Connell 2009, 134). Garfinkel’s chronicle of this “production” provided what Zimmerman referred to as “an unusually clear vision” (Zimmerman 1992, 197): to wit, the empirical means to decouple the initial outcome of sex assignment and the interactional accomplishment of gender.

The discovery that Agnes was not intersex, as she was asserting, but instead was taking hormones to enhance her feminine appearance, drew attention to the fact that Agnes was passing—conventionally understood as making efforts to successfully hide a stigmatizing secret. Connell argued that this “preoccupation” with Agnes’s efforts to pass avoided “important issues of contradictory embodiment” (R. Connell 2009, 107). Without denying the central role of accountability, Connell suggested an alternative: that Agnes was not so much hiding a secret about herself as she was seeking affirmation and an identity within a particular community that sex category might deliver.

Connell reminds us that Agnes's problem was not only one of interaction in the abstract, but *embodied* interaction in the here and now. It requires concerted effort, specific actions, and constant evaluation to ensure that the embodied comportment adequately reflects the ultimate purpose of achieving recognition. Connell (2012) has advanced a consideration of the implications of "contradictory embodiment"—embodiment that is at once unnatural, unpredictable, and unacceptable—as understood through an empirical examination of transsexuality in all its complexity. She calls for a turn away from a preoccupation with matters of individual identity toward the realities of practice and process in the interactional achievement of gender in specific contexts. Referring to transgender as "intransigent" (i.e., demanding recognition), Connell argues: "The contradiction has to be handled, and it has to be handled at the level of the body, since it arises in the process of embodiment" (2012, 868).

The compulsory character and the everyday challenges of such embodied recognition provide a theoretical point of departure for our analysis of transgender women in men's prisons. As an exemplar of Connell's "contradictory embodiment," Agnes—our imagined Agnes—cannot pass in a prison for men. In prison, Agnes and her transgender sisters reside in a setting where "everyone knows" they are biologically male, but where they nevertheless are motivated to seek continuous affirmation of their "natural" female and womanly characters. Under the sometimes brutal, and always difficult, conditions of the prison, transgender prisoners engage in a competitive pursuit of a femininity that does not constitute "passing" but does involve accountability to a normative standard and a "ladylike" ideal. Such practices require an intense preoccupation with bodily adornment and appearance as well as a deferent demeanor and a studied comportment. The result is the achievement of a *recognition* from others that one is close enough to a "real girl" to feel deserving of a kind of privilege.

The unique and often predatory environment of the prison is defined by deprivation, including both loss of freedom and markers of individuality typically used on the outside. In this context, transgender prisoners are distinct from their counterparts on the outside who seek to pass, and often do pass, as women. Precisely because transgender prisoners' lives are so radically unconventional, we use this article as an occasion to give voice to the pursuit of femininity in a men's prison and to reaffirm the value of a theoretical and empirical focus on the actual practices that constitute our gendered lives. To do so, we first turn to the theoretical stakes that motivate our empirical inquiry, and then we describe the original data

employed to understand the lives of transgender prisoners. Thereafter, we offer an empirical analysis of how transgender prisoners orient to and accomplish gender in prisons for men. We conclude with a discussion of the complicated relationship between embodiment and accountability in a context in which doing gender is problematized in consequential ways.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In their classic work “Doing Gender,” West and Zimmerman (1987) made problematic the prevailing perspective that the sex categories of female and male are (1) naturally defined and spring from mutually exclusive reproductive functions rooted in an unchanging biological nature; (2) clearly reflected in the myriad differences commonly observed between girls and boys, men and women; and (3) foundational to social inequalities that are commonsensically and adequately rationalized via these apparently intractable differences between males and females.

At the heart of the “doing gender” approach is the idea that individuals and their conduct—in virtually any course of action—can be evaluated in relation to a womanly or manly nature and character. The powerful gender ideals and norms that dominate in popular culture, advertising, and the media serve as cultural resources to guide a normative understanding of a gendered world. However, the doing of gender is far more than stylized performance or a regimented, scripted interaction. Owing to sex category assignment, women and men operate as if they are “naturally” different, and navigate a world that instantiates those differences. This is a cultural constant; how and in what ways those differences are created, granted meaning, and rendered consequential vary by the particulars of social setting and historical period.

This is akin to what Connell refers to as the ontoformative character of gender: “Practice starts from structure, but does not repetitively cite its starting point. Rather, social practice continuously brings social reality into being, and that social reality becomes the ground of new practice through time” (R. Connell 2012, 866; see also Butler 1993). Founded on this very idea, “doing gender” asserted the social mechanisms by which people preoccupy themselves with the gendering of social life, organize their expressions of themselves as competently feminine or masculine, and reaffirm the social structure that lends social life meaning and consequence. Seen in these terms, what animates the sex category/gender system is crucial to understanding both the unshakeable salience of sex

category and the workings of gender in social life. For that, we turn briefly to the concept of “accountability.”

In a recent reexamination of the concept of accountability as it applies to gender, Jocelyn Hollander (2013) provides a roadmap to disentangling three distinct aspects of accountability: *orientation* to sex category, evaluative *assessment* of oneself and others in relevant accountable conduct, and interactional *enforcement* of expectations associated with categorical membership, with a vast range of consequences for violation. In her discussion of each aspect, Hollander reaffirms what West and Zimmerman (1987) argued over a quarter of a century ago: Orientation to sex category is ubiquitous—and probably inevitable—but what is wholly dependent on context and which can change markedly over time is the particular focus of assessment, enforcement, and that which constitutes accountable conduct.<sup>1</sup>

West and Zimmerman did not concern themselves with the myriad ways in which social life is gendered; they theorized *how* we as members of social worlds make them meaningfully gendered. They did not show us the consequences of a gendered world; they identified and theorized an interactional route to those consequences. Likewise, they did not merely argue that gendered social structures produce inequality; they theorized the mechanisms behind the production of that inequality. By interrogating these mechanisms, they gave us a way to think about social order *and* social change. As Connell explained, “If the situated accomplishment of gender creates the illusion of a hierarchical natural order, this same situated accomplishment is a site where hierarchy can be contested” (R. Connell 2009, 109).

Gender scholars are turning to the experiences of transgender people to reinterrogate the workings of gender in social life (e.g., Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997; Halberstam 2005). These treatments underscore the situated character of gender, resist the impositions of the binary, and raise possibilities for structural disruption and social change. As Susan Stryker explained with regard to transgender studies writ large, a focus on transgender people and their experiences in specific institutional contexts brings to the fore “myriad specific subcultural expressions of gender atypicality” (Stryker 2006, 3). Also breaking new ground, the interactions of so-called “gender normals” and transgender people were examined by Schilt and Westbrook (2009). They found that the demands of doing gender appropriately varied not only by situation but by how sexualized those situations were. In addition, they found that the policing of gender, and the failure to fulfill gender expectations was itself gendered

(see also Catherine Connell's [2010] analysis of the experiences of 19 transgendered people). More recently, Connell directs analytic attention to how a changed embodied position in gender relations grounds new practices. She reminds us that "a transsexual woman must generate a practice" and asks, "What is to be done?" (R. Connell 2012, 868). Taking this call seriously, we turn to the unique data to unearth gender practices occurring within the dual realities of incarceration and contradictory embodiment.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

California, home to one of the largest correctional systems in the Western world (Petersilia 2008), is an ideal site for collecting data on transgender prisoners. When data collection began in 2008, approximately 160,000 adult prisoners were incarcerated in California's 33 prisons. Well over 90 percent of California state prisoners are housed in 30 prisons for adult men. Among these prisoners, there are more than 300 transgender inmates in prisons for men (Jenness, Sexton, and Sumner 2011). Assuming Brown and McDuffie's (2009) estimate that there are approximately 750 transgender prisoners in the United States is correct, California is home to nearly half of all transgender prisoners in the United States. Because lengthy descriptions of the data collection for the larger project can be found elsewhere (Jenness 2010, 2011; Jenness, Sexton, and Sumner 2011), here we provide a brief overview of how the transgender prison population in California prisons was delineated and offer a description of the protocols that drove original and secondary data collection.

David Valentine argues that the term *transgender* emerged in the early 1990s and came to be understood as "a collective category of identity which incorporates a diverse array of male- and female-bodied gender variant people who had previously been understood as distinct kinds of persons" (Valentine 2007, 4). It is not surprising that there is little agreement on what transgender means in the context of a men's prison and by what criteria an inmate could be—and should be—classified as transgender. In one of the most illuminating publications on the topic, Donaldson describes distinctions between a "jocker," "punk," "queen," "booty-bandid," "Daddy," and "Man." He describes confinement institutions as "the most sexist (as well as racist) environments in the country, bar none" and explains that within this institutional environment "the prison subculture

fuses sexual and social roles and assigns all prisoners accordingly" (Donaldson 1993, 5). Likewise, prison officials do not have an agreed upon definition of transgender that is used to identify and classify inmates, and they often conflate transgender with homosexual prisoners (Donaldson 1993; Sumner and Jenness, 2014).

Recognizing that distinct types of gender-variant people may or may not identify as transgender, for this work transgender prisoners were identified by deploying four specific criteria. A transgender inmate is a prisoner in a men's prison who (1) self-identifies as transgender (or something comparable); (2) presents as female, transgender, or feminine in prison or outside of prison; (3) receives any kind of medical treatment (physical or mental) for something related to how she presents herself or thinks about herself in terms of gender, including taking hormones to initiate and sustain the development of secondary sex characteristics to enhance femininity; or (4) participates in groups for transgender inmates. Meeting any one of these criteria qualified an inmate for inclusion in the larger study from which this article derives (Jenness 2010; Jenness et al. 2011). These criteria sidestep grander debates about who is and is not transgender and worked well for the diverse types of prisoners in California prisons who were identified by others as transgender and identified themselves as transgender. Even when transgender prisoners might prefer a different term, they nonetheless generally identified with "transgender" too, and referred to themselves as "transgenders," "tgs," "trannies," and "transwomen."

Inmates in California prisons who met the eligibility criteria described were invited to participate in the study. The field data collection process began in late April 2008 and ended in late June 2008. During this time, a trained interview team of eight interviewers traveled to 27 California prisons for adult men, met face-to-face with more than 500 inmates identified by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) as potentially transgender, and completed interviews with 315 transgender inmates. The interview schedule employed for the larger project from which the data are drawn was designed to capture a wealth of information on inmates' lives inside and outside prison. The mean duration for interviews was slightly less than one hour, the total interview time approached 300 hours, and the response rate was 95 percent. The final step in data collection involved concatenating existing official data retrieved from the CDCR's database on inmates—the Offender Based Information System—to the original self-report data (for more details, see Jenness 2010; Jenness et al. 2011).

## TRANSGENDER PRISONERS IN CALIFORNIA

The transgender population in California prisons for men is paradoxically visible and invisible (Jenness 2014; Tewksbury and Potter 2005). Prison officials and prisoners alike distinguish transgender prisoners as a special population of inmates in prisons for men. Transgender inmates constitute a highly visible population because their gender displays—for example, the shape of their eyebrows—often mark them as a distinct type of prisoner in an alpha male environment. Because transgender prisoners do not conform to the dictates of an extremely heteronormative and masculinist environment, corrections officials perceive transgender prisoners as a potential source of in-prison disorder and attendant management problems. Corrections officials and prisoners alike share an understanding of transgender prisoners as prisoners failing to “man-up” in prisons for men (Jenness 2010, 2011). In contrast, from the point of view of systematic, empirical social science, they are—or more accurately, *were*—what Tewksbury and Potter (2005) dubbed “a forgotten group” of prisoners.

In addition to being incarcerated, transgender prisoners are drastically and disproportionately marginalized along other dimensions of social status and health and welfare. When examined along the lines of employment, marital status, mental health, substance abuse, HIV status, homelessness, sex work, and victimization, the transgender prisoners in this study are more precariously situated than nonincarcerated and/or incarcerated nontransgender populations (Sexton, Jenness, and Sumner 2010). For example, transgender prisoners are *13 times* more likely than their nontransgender counterparts to be sexually assaulted in prison (Jenness et al. 2010; Jenness et al. 2011).

Reported at length elsewhere (Jenness et al. 2011; Jenness et al. 2007; Jenness, Sumner, Sexton, Alamillo-Luchase 2014), transgender prisoners are diverse in terms of self and identity. The vast majority (76.1 percent) identify as female when asked about their gender identity, with considerably fewer identifying as “male and female” (14 percent). About a third (33.3 percent) identify as “homosexual,” while 19.4 percent identify their sexual orientation as “transgender,” 18.1 percent identify as heterosexual, 11.3 percent identify as bisexual, and the remaining 17.8 percent identify as something else. The vast majority reported that they are sexually attracted to men in prison (81.9 percent), but a small minority indicated being attracted to both men and women in prison (15.6 percent), and a majority (75.8 percent) reported being attracted to men both outside and inside prison. The picture that emerges includes considerable same-sex attraction as transgender women make their way through dif-

ferentially gendered social landscapes and engage in contextualized identity projects associated with being in prison (Jenness et al. 2011; Jenness et al. 2014; Sexton and Jenness 2014; Sumner, Sexton, Jenness, and Maxson in press). More recently, Sexton and Jenness (2013) found that, despite competing centrifugal forces, there is an empirically discernable collective identity among transgender prisoners.

Distinguished from the prison population and reporting a diverse repertoire of identities, sensibilities, and desires, transgender prisoners bring a plethora of understandings that are manifested in their daily embodied gender practices; their bodies are, quite literally, locked up. In this institutional context, transgender prisoners face very different interactional challenges from those faced by their counterparts on the outside. These challenges reveal a great deal about the situated character of gender as well as how gender practices unfold in the context of contradictory embodiment.

### **PURSUIT OF “THE REAL DEAL”**

One of the basic underlying assumptions of prison operations is that there are two types of people—males and females—and that fact looms large. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, sex segregation in prison was arguably the least contested prison policy/practice across geographical region, local government, prison level, and inmate population. In short, the institutional manifestation of the prison culture’s sex/gender binary is taken for granted and defines prison existence in virtually every aspect (Sumner and Jenness 2014).

It is within this context that we focus on the pursuit of “the real deal” to refer to the complicated dynamic whereby transgender prisoners claim and assert their femininity in prison—a hegemonically defined hypermasculine and heteronormative environment with an abundance of alpha males, sexism, and violence. By their own account, transgender prisoners assert themselves with well-understood motivations, patterned manifestations, and an understanding of very real consequences for themselves and others. To quote them, they are “the girls among men.” For these inmates, their very presence in a men’s prison establishes their sex categorization as male; subsequent and ongoing interaction, however, offers the chance to vie for an “authentic” femininity.

We use the term *gender authenticity* to refer to the pursuit of full recognition, or what some transgender prisoners refer to as “the real deal,” or being a “real girl.” This pursuit begins with an orientation to, and

acknowledgement of, the self as male (at least in the first instance) and an awareness of the fact that, as prisoners in a men's prison, transgender prisoners are immediately understood as male in a prison for men (Jenness 2010; Sumner and Jenness 2014). The manifest desire to be taken as feminine, and thus female, prompts and sustains a commitment to "act like a lady." The commitment to, and everyday practice of, acting like a lady sets the stage for a playful *and* serious competition among transgender prisoners for the attention and affection of "real men" in prison. The attention and adoration of "real men," in turn, is taken to be an important measure of gender status among transgender prisoners. These features of the competitive pursuit of gender authenticity are crucial to the social organization of gender in prison.<sup>2</sup> The effort to be recognized as "a lady" is not something one finally achieves, but pursues as an ongoing proposition. The status of lady—as authentically female—is a provisional one deployed in a context in which transgender prisoners are "clocked," a subject to which we now turn.

### **Being Known as Male: "I'm in Here and I'm Already Clocked"**

Transgender prisoners often used the word "clocked" as a way of indicating that their ability to pass as women is effectively denied in a prison built for and inhabited exclusively by males. The institutional context in which they reside determines which side of the sex categorical binary system they are thought to belong. Being clocked, therefore, is not about attempting to pass and being "discovered" so that some are privy to the "truth" and others are not. A sex-segregated prison for men is a unique environment where there is no other truth possible: Every prisoner is male, not matter how they look or act. It is here where the institutionalization of sex category membership interacts so critically with gender practice. Being clocked sets the terms and conditions for doing gender in prison precisely because it precludes passing as it is conventionally understood.

A white<sup>3</sup> transgender prisoner in her midtwenties reported taking hormones when she was 15 and coming to prison when she was 18 for "an armed robbery and carjacking I did with my boyfriend" (ID no. 35<sup>4</sup>). She explained, "I was stupid, just stupid. But, I've learned the hard way. Twenty-four years of my life! That's the hard way." Comparing her life outside prison to her life in prison, she said, "I lived as a girl in high school, passed on the streets. Now [in prison], everyone knows, so who cares?" She explained that now that she is in prison there is no passing "because I'm in here and I'm already clocked." Elaborating, she described how outside prison she didn't wear shorts because she has "manly legs,"

but contrasted this to life in prison with “now I’ll wear shorts, too, even though I have manly legs.” She went on to say “my legs are not manly in a good way—not like Tina Turner’s.” In this case, even as “clocking” makes one vulnerable to certain dangers, it can also be liberating to be relieved of the need to pass.

Likewise, an African American transgender prisoner in her midthirties who identified herself as a “pre-op transsexual” with “some facial surgery (chin, cheeks, and nose)” reported, “I’ve never been clocked on the streets” (ID no. 32). However, later in the interview she explained that, while in prison, she is treated by CDCR personnel and other inmates alike as male. When asked how correctional officers treat her, she reported being harassed routinely: “Most of the time, actually. Just today an officer said, ‘Your jaw is wired shut,<sup>5</sup> you’re out of service.’ C’mon, how rude is that? They also call me ‘sissy boy.’ That gets old.” Later in the interview she made it clear how correctional officers and other prisoners reveal that “they think I’m gay or a gay boy.”<sup>6</sup>

Other transgender prisoners made explicit connections between being clocked and the many challenges they face being transgender in prison, including the ongoing management of the threat and reality of violence. A biracial transgender prisoner serving time for fraud reported that she came to California from a state in the Midwest because she assumed California would be more tolerant of alternative lifestyles. She described the nature of being transgender in a men’s prison this way: “Everyone in prison knows I’m transgender. But outside they don’t” (ID no. 34). Later in the interview, she lamented, “Yes, but most people don’t know. They think, ‘You like men, you’re gay.’ Most people don’t get it—that I’m transgender, not gay.” An African American transgender prisoner, who lived as a woman on the streets in Los Angeles and worked as a prostitute for over 20 years, proclaimed, “I know I’m not a girl; I was born a boy. But I have tendencies as a girl” (ID no. 1).

Other transgender prisoners cited anatomical realities (as they existed at the time of the interview) as evidence of their nonnormative status as women, referencing their maleness along the way. An African American transgender inmate who reported removing her own male genitals and being on hormones to enhance her feminine appearance since her teen years made it clear that she has not forgotten how she was born (as a male). She complicated the picture by describing her attributes compared to those of other transgender prisoners:

I’m 40D. Not many like that in here. And, I have a big ass, we call it “booty.” I don’t mind being on a yard with other transgenders because they

can't match this. And, the hormones shrink your dick and I don't have any testicles. I had them cut off when I was a teenager. . . . When you're in prison, everyone knows who you are—a man. It's not a big secret. Or, at least they think they know who you are. I'm a man. I'm not confused. I'm not a woman. I know I don't bleed. I can't produce children. I don't have a pussy. I have breasts because I grew them with hormones. It's not like you. I just assume your breasts are natural. Anyone who says, "I'm just like you" is full of shit. C'mon. We're women, but not like you. You know the difference. I know the difference. And they know the difference.

Here we see differing theories reflected in inmate accounts for why, if they are embodied males, they are transgender. The prisoner just quoted alludes to "tendencies," suggesting misplacement in sex category. Others bow to the primacy of embodiment and the naturalness of sex category when they say, as they often did, "I'm not like you" (to a female interviewer) or "I'm a woman, but not a female."

Transgender prisoners made reference to women who are "biologics" as compared to themselves, who are not. Consider the description provided by an outspoken white transgender prisoner who self-identifies as "the transgender ring leader" and who "takes care of the girls around here" while serving a life sentence and maintaining a "marriage-like" relationship with another prisoner. During an interview, she asked the lead author, "Val, you're a biologic, right?"<sup>7</sup> After receiving an affirmative response, she went on to say:

I figured. We have the utmost respect for biologics. You are perfection. I am Memorex. You are what I can never attain. But, like all good Memorexes, I try to get close. Always a copy. Never the real deal. But a damn good copy. People can't tell the difference between the real deal and a damn good copy. You're real. I'll never be the same. Do you know Lt. Commander Data [on Star Trek] looks human and acts human, but will never be human. He's an android, not a human. It's kind of the same. (ID no. 40)

The distinction between a "biologic" and another type of woman is illustrated with reference to anatomy and biological functioning. When a transgender prisoner who proudly revealed she has legal documentation that identifies her as female was asked whether she would prefer to be housed in a men's prison or a women's prison, she immediately replied, "Men's." She added, "That's a hard one. I don't want to be with women because they are vicious. They are worse than men. Their hormones are going all the time. Imagine being around 60 women and two are on their period at the

same time! God. Imagine how bad that would be?" (ID no. 34). Likewise, an Asian transgender prisoner who was born outside the United States and expressed concerns about her immigration status reported that she has been transgender since high school, began taking hormones at 14, and earned a good living as a hairdresser before coming to prison. Noting that her family accepts her transgender status, she said, "Before I got into drugs I had a good life. I got into meth—the monster. Everything went downhill" (ID no. 39). She went on to compare herself to other transgender prisoners, as well as other [real] women:

People on the outside are way different. I came here transgender, but I call them broken souls. A lot of them find themselves here, transition in here. I think it is for affection, the attention, the loneliness. You could be anything in here. You can still find yourself a man. They are gay boys, but men. I came in transgender. I'm different. I knew I was transgender, not a gay boy who became transgender. I would give my soul to be a woman. Who wouldn't want to be nurturant, to be loving, to be kind? Women bring peace to the world. They unite people. A mother is everything.

She made a distinction between "fat men titties" and the breasts of women, and lamented that she can never give birth like other women.

Regardless of whether one believes one is inherently female, the biologic remains a crucial reference point, as transgender prisoners expressed enthusiasm for being as close to the real deal as possible. An Hispanic transgender prisoner with a long history of engaging in sex work, struggling with drug addiction, and enduring imprisonment explained, "They [respect me because they] see that I'm all the way out—that I'm the real deal. I'm going all the way. I'm hoping to have surgery. I'm not a transgender, I'm a woman. I have my breasts from hormones. I'm the real deal. I want Marcy Bowers to do the surgery" (ID no. 4).<sup>8</sup> Expressions such as these are often accompanied by self-assessments regarding how close to the goal—the real deal—one is, and is becoming.

What we might call the "problem of approximation" is an ever-present normative benchmark to separate the biologic from both the real woman and the failed pretender, even when intentions to seek sex reassignment surgery are in play. Therefore, extant theories of passing as a sociological process are inapplicable, and accountability to membership in one's sex category is no longer at issue. However, orienting accountability to a locally defined authenticity puts a premium on the process of pursuing a convincingly feminine appearance and demeanor. The context renders sensible and recognizable the ongoing effort (and its consequence) that

seeks to move beyond the (known) biological truth to approach the real deal, even if it is inevitably a “Memorex.” Accordingly, passing is less about biological and anatomical secrets to be managed and more about making gender commitments visible.

The prison environment sets the stage for embodiment to be understood as unforgiving (“Everyone knows”) *and* eminently deniable (“Who cares?”). Through the pursuit of the real deal, however, gender expectations remain and demand that the transgender prisoner’s behavior reflects an inherent femininity—as if one were really and truly female. To do this requires participation in an additional dynamic—acting like a lady in prison—which, as we describe in the next section, reveals the distinct ways in which gender is embedded in individual selves, cultural rules, social interaction, and organizational and institutional arrangements (Lorber 1994).

### **The Importance of Acting Like a Lady: “It’s Being Proper”**

To enhance one’s feminine appearance and approach the real deal, transgender prisoners emphasized the importance of “acting like a lady.” As they did so, particular constructs of classed normative understandings were employed to establish a valued femininity as a route to respect, as revealed in the following exchange:

Interviewer: How do transgender inmates get respect?

Prisoner: Act like a lady.

Interviewer: Why does acting like a lady in a men’s prison get you respect?

Prisoner: If a man is a gentleman and they see a queen act that way, it’s important for him to trust you because you’re showing self-confidence in an environment that is crazy. That’s why queens don’t get hurt. You being a lady is like a gold credit card.

The dynamic nexus between being transgender in a sex-segregated environment and the centrality of earning respect as a lady is anchored in the embrace of a feminine ideal akin to the iconic Victorian-era normative construct first described by Barbara Welter in “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860” (Welter 1966).

When asked “What does a ‘lady’ act like?” transgender prisoners provided illuminating answers. A Mexican transgender prisoner explained that acting like a lady entailed “staying in the women’s spot. Don’t talk bad. Don’t make comments about things that don’t concern you. Being a

woman is about staying in line" (ID no. 12). Another transgender prisoner, who attributed many of her problems throughout her adult life to methamphetamine use that led to prostitution, went further:

Interviewer: What does a lady act like?

Prisoner: No sleeping with everyone. No going out on the yard with just a sports bra on. C'mon, you know what a lady acts like. It's being proper. (ID no. 35)

Many transgender prisoners were quick to talk about other transgender prisoners as "skanks," a clear reference to sexual promiscuity with connotations of disapproval in a context in which the values of social and sexual restraint are privileged. Jennifer Sumner explained the transgender code of conduct: "Transgender inmates who are seen to be 'messing' with another's man or 'messing' with too many men are labeled as 'slutty' and considered to be 'whores' or 'skanks'" (Sumner 2009, 190).

For transgender prisoners in men's prisons, a commitment to acting like a lady often was revealed in response to questions designed to solicit respondents' sense of what gets them—and other transgender prisoners—respect in prison. When asked "Does appearing more feminine get you respect from other (nontransgender) inmates?" the majority of the respondents (64.3 percent) said "Yes." When asked "Why?" a transgender prisoner in her midthirties serving her third term explained the benefits of acting like a lady in prison this way:

Prisoner: They [other prisoners] give me a different pardon. If I'm going in line to chow, it's likely someone will let me go first.

Interviewer: What exactly is a different pardon?

Prisoner: A pardon is a special consideration. That's what makes me feel respected. It's tasteful, especially if it comes from a regular guy. That's him telling me that I'm carrying myself like a lady. It's about being treated like a lady and made to feel like a lady. That's a special pardon. The more you get special pardons, the more you are being treated like a lady. (ID no. 32)

In a more dramatic illustration, a middle-aged African American transgender prisoner who introduced herself by using a famous model's name and later in the interview called herself a "crack whore" invited the interviewer to see the poster above the toilet in her cell and said, "I act like a lady and I have a poster that says so above the toilet in my cell" (ID no. 3). She explained that she sits when she pees, and because cells are shared

and visible to other prisoners in the cell block, everyone can see that she sits when she pees. For her, this is a sign that indicates she is acting like a lady, and for all to see that she pees accordingly.

Life for transgender prisoners is nothing if not variable and a set of contradictions, and here is where the multiplicities of gender are evident. Transgender prisoners reported circumstances in which the luxury of “acting like a lady” necessarily gave way to expressions of violence. Almost half (44.7 percent) of the transgender prisoners in this study reported being involved in violence while living in their current housing unit, and, on average, they have been in their current housing unit only about a year. Moreover, well over half (89.2 percent) of the transgender prisoners in this study reported being involved in violence while incarcerated in a California prison, with an average sentence in California prisons of 10.9 years.

For some, engagement in physical violence was not at odds with acting like a lady insofar as any woman in a situation that requires violence would behave similarly. A middle-aged African American transgender prisoner convicted of a second strike for “great bodily injury” explained how she initiated a violent confrontation with a group of four men on the yard after they refused to cease making pejorative comments about her husband (who was also her cellmate for over three years) because he was openly involved with her. She approached the men on the yard, confronted them about their harassment, asked them if there was a problem, told them to “cut the comments,” and advised them that if the comments continued she would have to “get busy” with them:

Interviewer: What do you mean by “get busy”?

Prisoner: You know, put the cheese on the crackers and make it happen.

Interviewer: And what does that—“put the cheese on the crackers”—mean?

Prisoner: Fight. (ID no. 105)

In response to being asked “Does fighting feel at odds with being a woman?” she said:

Oh, girl, you just don’t understand. Let’s review. Take a transgender. Take any female. A Black woman. A Latina woman. A Asian woman. *Any* woman. There is no way a woman with a strong will and self-respect is going to let themselves be mistreated. You’d be surprised what women can do. Women will cut you. Women will stab you. Violence is violence. There’s no such thing as transgender violence and other women’s violence.

It's all the same. People do what they have to do to take care of themselves. The difference with us is, well, violence is ugly. We don't want to be violent. We want to be beautiful. We're on hormones, girl. But hit me or disrespect me and I'll knock you out. I will. You would knock someone out, too. You'd be surprised what you would do if you had to; you just haven't had to—have you?

Others described situations in which they had to "man up," "put on my shoes," and "put down my purse and fight." In many cases, transgender prisoners reported taking a "time out" or a "stop pattern" to acting like a lady, and engaging in physical altercations with other prisoners as a way to protect or marshal respect. An older white transgender prisoner explained:

If you don't respect yourself, no one will. You don't have to be tough. I can fight and lose and get respect. I can run from a fight and get no respect. I'd be a coward. So, it's not about being tough, it's about standing your ground. (ID no. 6)

The use of violence for transgender inmates to gain respect is comparable to Nikki Jones's vivid descriptions of West Philadelphia high school girls crafting a femininity that accommodates periodic violent defense of one's self-respect (Jones 2009; see also Miller 2008).

In more dramatic terms, when asked if there are situations in prison in which violence between inmates is necessary, an HIV-positive transgender prisoner said:

Prisoner: Yes. Gang bangers come in here and say something—like, "Hey, half dead!" [to HIVs] or "You're dying anyway." With me, if it becomes too much I put my purse down and fight. I'll let that part of me come out.

Interviewer: What part is that?

Prisoner: The non-ladylike. The ugly side of me. (ID no. 8)

Here the dual status of clocked as male and feminine like a lady exist in close social proximity. The situatedness of gender in this context allows us to see this dynamic as far more than a choice between absolutes—*either* femininity *or* masculinity. The violence engaged in may draw its content from forms of expression typically understood as masculine, but such forms are undertaken in the context of a *suspended* ladylike "ideal" or an extension of what a woman has to do to demand

and secure respect. In other words, violence represents an “ugly side” of a lady, and not the lady herself. As a consequence, the accomplishment of gender to invoke a normative *feminine* standard rests next to the accomplishment of gender to invoke a normative *masculine* standard. In the context of a prison, there is perhaps no better example of the situated character of gender than when one pees “like a lady” in one moment and “stands her ground” in the next.

For transgender prisoners, however, violence can carry consequences for the successful pursuit of the real deal. Being clocked as male means that any deployment of the “ugly side” constitutes a counter affirmation of a “natural” status as male. Thus, transgender prisoners are motivated to find ways to avoid physical violence. A white transgender prisoner with long flowing hair who has been doing time—off and on—since the late 1980s and is now in her midforties explained this dilemma:

Prisoner: I am a man, but I choose to look like a woman and I want to be treated like a woman. That’s what makes me transgender. I recently had an argument with my cellie and he told me to put my shoes on, which means to fight. I wouldn’t put them on. I wouldn’t fight.

Interviewer: So women don’t fight?

Prisoner: Right.

Interviewer: What else makes you feel treated like a woman?

Prisoner: All the courtesies a man would afford a woman, like my trays are cleared by my cellie—he takes my tray in chow line. (ID no. 26)

Whether transgender women actually fight or not—and the data suggest they do—is not the point; the point is the fact that they render fighting sensible through a gendered lens.

### **Competition among the Ladies: “Fun, Dangerous, and Real”**

Ample self-report evidence reveals friendly competition among ladies. For example, when asked “Would you prefer more transgender inmates in your housing unit?” quite often transgender prisoners expressed ambivalence born of wanting more “girls” in their living environments in the hopes of importing understanding and support, but at the same time expressed reluctance at the prospect of increased competition for social status in the prison order. An African American transgender prisoner said, “It’s hard. I want the company of men, but I feel safe around the transgenders, but I like

women friends" (ID no. 1). When asked the same question, an Hispanic transgender prisoner replied:

We call them [other transgender inmates] bitches, but with affection. Because the straights will try to hit on them as much. It's odd. You want friends, but you don't want the hassle, the drama that comes with them. I'm torn. I want them around, but I don't want them around. It's good and bad. (ID no. 2)

Similarly, an HIV-positive transgender prisoner who reported recently breaking up with her cellmate/institutional husband and having "a gentleman on the street who is waiting for me" described her relationship with other transgender prisoners:

Yes, they flirt, but it's not pressure. That's just play. They know what kind of person I am—monogamous. I don't behave like a slut. Most of the other girls do, but I don't. I respect myself too much. [I] don't want to live with other transgenders—it's like too many women in the kitchen. It sounds so selfish, but less transgender inmates is better; like I said, too many women in the kitchen. Too much promiscuity. I want a relationship that is monogamous. Some of the girls, I don't respect. They are more promiscuous. They are nasty. Skanky. They are. I'm not like that. (ID no. 5)

When asked "Does appearing more feminine get you respect from other transgender inmates?" a white transgender prisoner living among many other transgender prisoners explained, "It tends to get negative. They get jealous. Because I look and act like a woman; they have to try harder [than I do]. They feel threatened by how natural it is for me" (ID no. 8). Similarly, a white transgender prisoner who has served almost 20 years of a life sentence in more than ten different prisons said, "I'm not sure. Sometimes it's jealousy, competition. If people compete with me that means they respect me enough to treat me as a girl—and they do compete" (ID no. 9). An older, more subdued white transgender inmate who explained "I didn't become transgender until I hit [current housing unit] at [current prison]," and "My morals have come a long way [since being in prison]" also commented on the complexities of femininity and respect:

Some respect you a lot; some are angered because you do better than they—you look better; some are angry because you're not normal. Lots goes on when you're trying to be fem. It's fun, dangerous, and it's real. All girls learn from other girls. Transgenders learn from other transgenders. It's a way of learning to do things better, to be better women. (ID no. 6)

Finally, a young Hispanic transgender inmate said, “No, they’re jealous. It’s like a beauty pageant. You’re all here and seemingly getting along. But not really. Really, it’s a competition. They smile to your face, but not sincerely. There’s only one winner and maybe a runner-up” (ID no. 35).

This “pageant” requires other prisoners—the men—to be judges socially positioned to bestow status on transgender prisoners. The accomplishment of gender by transgender prisoners must draw crucial meaning from their primary audience. In various ways, transgender prisoners reported the centrality of securing attention from men (i.e., nontransgender prisoners). An older white transgender prisoner playfully described:

I was going into chow and a couple of other inmates grabbed my ass and told me how sweet it is. They are males who are here and want sex. It’s like a guy who goes to the strip club. I’m the entertainment and the meat. I wasn’t offended. Those kinds of comments and gropes—I find it complimentary at my age. I’m [over 50]. I’m glad I can still draw the attention. (ID no. 6)

Moving beyond stories of (seemingly) superficial pleasure, transgender prisoners told touching stories of caretaking from other nontransgender prisoners with whom they formed intimate relationships. In an emotional interview, a very ill transgender prisoner who reported struggling with addiction most of her adult life, living on the streets before coming to prison, engaging in prostitution for many years, and being HIV-positive explained how important her prison husband is to her ability to manage in prison:

Prisoner: We [my husband in prison and I] clicked and we have a lot in common. He’s very supportive of me. Because I’m on an HIV regime he does nice things for me.

Interviewer: Like what?

Prisoner: Well, like hold my hair when I vomit in the cell and not get mad at me. (ID no. 8)

This simple consideration took on significant meaning to her because it came at the hands of a man (and a husband, no less) and is easily seen by her as an affirmation of her status as female (i.e., a woman worthy of being cared for by a man and taken care of like a wife). Throughout the interviews, transgender prisoners expressed appreciation for caring interactions with real men that served to recognize them as women. These simple, but much desired, interactions included being walked

across the yard, given cuts in the chow line, and having an umbrella held over your head in the rain.

From the point of view of many transgender prisoners, the non-transgender prisoners are seen as protectors as well as providers. When asked “What is the best way for transgender inmates to avoid being victimized?” a white transgender prisoner who worked as a marketing researcher before coming to prison described a familiar gendered reciprocity: “Get someone to protect you. He’ll take you under his wing. He’ll become protective of you—like men do with women” (ID no. 10). She went on to explain her own relationship situation:

We’re involved, but it’s not sexual yet. It’s been a month. It’s good for us to be in a marriage. We can and we can’t fend for ourselves. He’s our protector—just like on the streets. If someone did something to you, he would take care of them. If someone were to put his hands on me or degrade me, he would go and tell him, “Don’t disrespect her. If you’re disrespecting her, you’re disrespecting me.” See, I can get some respect through him.

She paused and added, “One of the things I have to do as a transgender is to deal with men who always want sex. So, I’ve found that the best thing to do is to make them give me something. I make them give me things—like take me to the mini canteen. It’s like going on a date.” She then described the similarities in terms of “give and take” in which “I give them a little flirt—it doesn’t take much,” concluding, “It’s like petting a dog, only the dog pays you. I’ve found that men need women to be vulnerable. They want to take care of you—almost like a pet. I like it.”

When asked about the best way to avoid victimization in prison, another transgender prisoner said, “I’ve been lucky to have guys who look at me as female and then they want to take care of me. They have that natural instinct—to protect me as a woman—from other men. That’s how men are” (ID no. 8). Here, the bargain that results in a borrowing of respect depends on acceptance of the accomplishment of gender as indicative of a “natural” state, whether a male instinct to protect a woman, or the essential female qualities exhibited by transgender prisoners. According to transgender prisoners, nontransgender prisoners may be moved to chivalry, solicitous or protective behavior toward them as “ladies,” calling forth a natural response from men. For some, respect is the precursor to love. An African American transgender prisoner said, “It just means getting to be nice, getting to be taken care of, and getting to be, you know, understood and loved” (ID no. 1).

The pursuit of femininity within this particular context illuminates the body's uncanny ability to override the biological convictions that are being imposed on it through institutional conditions. The absence of biologics among the prison population does not undermine gender, nor does the obvious lack of the real deal suspend the pursuit of femininity inside this alpha male space. A Latina transgender woman in her twenties who described herself as a "gay boy" "doing drag outside [of prison]" reported first taking hormones in prison and showcased her breasts during the interview by lifting them while talking about their growing size. She said, "A lot of guys get fed the illusion. I give good illusion. My hair. My ass. The hormones help. I create the package. They buy it—sometimes, anyway" (ID no. 21). She continued, "I'm still male. I know that. I know I'm not a woman. I'm transgender. Everything about me is female. But, my anatomy is male. . . . See, I know I'm an illusion." However, it is not a capricious or arbitrary illusion. A transgender prisoner explained, "It's not something I just made up" (ID no. 27).

Within the institutional context of sex-segregated carceral environments, the "fragile fictions" of personhood (Snorton 2009) and the interactional dynamics we report are informed by a binary logic that supports the "natural" gendering of bodies and, at the same time, serves as a catalyst for a radical rupture of that logic. In the context of prisons for men (and only men), it is not the commitment to biological differences that dictate the gender dynamics among members, but the *commitment of bodies* to act like, and be received as, "ladies" and "men." Though biological considerations are readily available, they are systematically rendered incompatible with the business of upholding categorical distinctions between women and men. In their capacity to engage in social practice, transgender people and bodies triumphantly make use of "natural categories" despite institutional evidence that claims otherwise (Fenstermaker and Budesá 2013). The dynamics reported in this analysis reveal that transgender women in men's prisons are simultaneously positioned as a source of cultural affirmation, intervention, and critique.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The empirical analysis we present in this article suggests that under the harsh conditions of the prison, transgender prisoners engage in a set of activities that together constitute what we refer to as a pursuit of gender authenticity, or what they call the real deal. These activities begin with an

orientation to sex category through an acknowledgement that prisoners are institutionally understood as male. Transgender prisoners in men's prisons express a desire to secure standing as a "real girl" or the "best girl" possible in a men's prison. This desire translates into expressions of situated gendered practices that embrace male dominance, heteronormativity, classed and raced gender ideals, and a daily acceptance of inequality. To succeed in being "close enough" to the real deal requires a particular type of participation in a male-dominated system that can, under the right conditions, dole out a modicum of perceived privilege.

We argue that orientation to sex category is crucial to understanding the content of specific gender practices that make reference to a "natural" female and that are informed by expectations of what it is to be a "real lady." The playful yet serious competition among transgender prisoners for the attention and affection of "real men" allows the community of prisoners—transgender and nontransgender alike—to participate in a gendered existence that orders everyday expectations and behaviors, as well as the allocation of resources, symbolic and material. The experiences of transgender inmates illustrate that whatever femininity is undertaken, in whatever way, and for whatever ends, it is not done to pass—to mask a secret that, if revealed, could be discrediting (Goffman 1963; see also R. Connell 2012; Snorton 2009). In prison, the pursuit of femininity involves accountability to a set of normative standards, informed by cultural constructions of a "ladylike" ideal, even when sometimes transgender prisoners engage in a "stop pattern" and allow the "ugly side" to be revealed. What is sought is accountability to a putative sex category: if, through the accomplishment of gender in this setting, one can appear to embody the imagined biologic real deal, then one is close enough—and good enough—to hope for some respect. All gendered practices are undertaken within the context of a powerfully heteronormative masculine environment that privileges males and denigrates females. One pursues a femininity that achieves the real deal in order to manage the inevitable disrespect and violence heaped upon the feminine.

In her recent article, Raewyn Connell writes eloquently of the "multiple narratives of embodiment" (2012, 867), such that we cannot speak meaningfully of *the* transgender or *the* transsexual experience. This should come as no surprise to gender theorists, which is likely why Connell calls for greater empirical and analytic attention to the multiplicities of transsexual lives. Those social scientists who study gender are less likely to be seduced by a unitary construction of transgender or a new binary composed of "us" and "transgender." Attention to both the complexities of

transgender and its situated character reveals the myriad ways in which social change is—and is not—made. Transgender women in prison for men are, to borrow the words of Connell one last time, “neither enemies of change nor heralds of a new world” (R. Connell 2012, 872).

Transgender prisoners assessed themselves and other transgender inmates according to a set of normative expectations deftly designed with a sex categorical world in mind. We learn from the Agneses in prison that the accomplishment of gender through the pursuit of the real deal certainly affirms one’s elective place in the binary and justifies behavior as if springing “naturally” from it. Moreover, it directs us not only to the agentic power of embodiment that Connell asserts (R. Connell 2012) but also to the likewise powerfully constructed and situated nature of both sex *and* gender. Together they are adapted to and are made meaningful in a real world, including the harsh world of prisons for men.

Transgender inmates exemplify a will to present and live one’s “real” self, even under impossible—and sometimes impossibly dangerous—conditions. Future research that includes not only the “real girls” but also the “real men” would be able to contribute to the picture we paint here of how masculinity and femininity are accomplished by transgender prisoners. What are, after all, “real girls” without “real men” and vice versa?

We conclude where we began: in the UCLA clinic long ago when Agnes’s behavior was interpreted only as passing. The Agneses in prison do not hide and they cannot deceive. Their gendered behavior in prison can be understood as part of an ongoing, cooperative collusion where their selves are revealed and their relationships with non-transgender prisoners likewise reaffirm an unequal, often violent and always hegemonically male, community. The search for the real deal is fundamentally a pursuit of recognition, respect, and belonging.

## NOTES

1. Sex category is not the only categorical membership around which we order social life (see West and Fenstermaker [1995] for a discussion of “doing” race, class, and gender).

2. Not every transgender prisoner was engaged in the quest for “gender authenticity” as we describe it, and therefore any interpretation of the analysis as a unitary one is misplaced. Nevertheless, the transgender prisoners who participated in this study revealed a preponderance of evidence that both the expectations and the practices we describe are an important aspect of daily existence and a salient feature of prison culture.

3. Designations of the race/ethnicity of these prisoners are presented to render visible the diversity of the transgender prisoner population. These designations are based on their self-identification, if given during an interview or on official institutional data. These two sources of designations may differ in interesting ways (Calavita and Jenness 2013) and different classification categories are a function of the fluid and contingent nature of racial identification and larger processes of racialization in a prison context (Saperstein and Penner 2010).

4. The use of interviewee numbers allows us to maintain confidentiality and allows the reader to track particular study participants throughout the article as well as to attribute multiple quotes to the same prisoner. We considered using pseudonyms, but in the interest of not imposing gendered identities on them, we chose the neutrality of interviewee numbers. According to prisoners with whom we have consulted, this practice is not offensive or dehumanizing; some prefer it to the assignment of a false name insofar as that practice seems misleading and falsely intimate. Fortunately, the use of ID numbers is an accepted convention in sociology journals (e.g., Calavita and Jenness 2013).

5. This person had just been discharged from the infirmary after sustaining injuries in a physical altercation with another prisoner. Her jaw was wired shut, but she was able to do the interview, which she wanted to do.

6. Transgender prisoners often distinguish themselves from what they and other prisoners call “gay boys.”

7. Being a “biologic” means being born biologically female.

8. Marcy Bowers is a well-known male-to-female transgender surgeon seen on television.

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